

Sūrah 112

Al-Ikhlāṣ

(Sincerity)

(Makkan Period)

Title

al-Ikhlāṣ (sincerity) is both the title and subject matter of this *Sūrah*, for it deals exclusively with pure and sincere monotheism. Generally, titles of Qur'ānic *Sūrahs* consist of some word used in that *Sūrah*. However, the word *ikhhlāṣ* is not employed in this *Sūrah*. Instead, what it signifies is that one who sincerely believes will get rid of polytheism.

Period of Revelation

Opinions differ on its Makkan or Madīnan origin, especially in light of the divergent reports about the occasion of its revelation. Here are some of these reports:

1. 'Abd Allāh ibn Mas'ūd reports that the Quraysh had asked the Prophet (peace be upon him) to inform them of Allah's pedigree.¹ In response, this *Sūrah* was revealed, (Ṭabarānī).

1. It was customary among Arabs to find out about one's pedigree, especially one's tribe when being introduced. In accordance with the same mindset, they asked the Prophet (peace be upon him) to tell them about the pedigree of his Lord.

2. Abū al-'Āliyah reports on the authority of Ubayy ibn Ka'b that the polytheists enquired of the Prophet (peace be upon him) as to the pedigree of his Lord. Accordingly, Allah sent down this *Sūrah*, (Aḥmad, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Ibn Jarīr, Tirmidhī, Bukhārī, Ibn al-Mundhir, Ḥākim and Bayhaqī). Tirmidhī cited Abū al-'Āliyah's report, without any reference to Ubayy ibn Ka'b and rated it as more authentic.
3. Jābir ibn 'Abd Allāh says: "An Arab (or some people) asked the Prophet (peace be upon him) to tell them about the pedigree of his Lord. As a result, this *Sūrah* came down," (Abū Ya'lā, Ibn Jarīr, Ibn al-Mundhir, Ṭabarānī, Bayhaqī and Abū Nu'aym.)
4. On the authority of Ibn 'Abbās, 'Ikrimah relates: "A group of Jews called on the Prophet (peace be upon him). Among them were Ka'b ibn Ashraf and Huyayy ibn Akṭab. They said: 'O Muḥammad! Tell us of what kind is your Lord Who has sent you?' In response to the same, Allah revealed this *Sūrah*," (Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Ibn 'Adī and Bayhaqī).

In his *tafsīr* on this *Sūrah*, Ibn Taymiyyah has cited these reports:

5. Anas informs: "Some Jews of Khaybar called on the Prophet (peace be upon him) and said: "O Abū al-Qāsim, Allah has created angels from light, Adam from clay, Iblīs from a flame of fire, the sky from smoke and the earth from water. Now tell us about your Lord (of what is He made?)." The Prophet (peace be upon him) did not give them any reply. Then Gabriel visited him and told him: "O Muḥammad, say to them (he then transmitted this *Sūrah* to him)."
6. 'Āmir ibn al-Ṭufayl asked the Prophet (peace be upon him): "O Muḥammad, to what do you call us?" He told him that he invited them to Allah. Upon this he asked the latter to enlighten him about Him: "Is He made of gold, silver or iron?" Upon this *Sūrah al-Ikhlāṣ* was sent down.
7. Ḍaḥḥāk, Qatādah and Muqātil report: "Some Jewish rabbis visited the Prophet (peace be upon him) and asked him: "O Muḥammad, tell us about your Lord. It may be that we embrace faith at your hands. Allah has spelled out His attributes in the

Torah. Tell us of what is He made? What is His gender? Is He made of gold, copper, brass, iron or silver? What does He eat and drink? From whom did He inherit this universe and who will later inherit it from Him?" In response to these questions, this *Sūrah* was sent down."

8. Ibn 'Abbās reports: "A delegation of seven church fathers from Najrān visited the Prophet (peace be upon him) and asked him: "Tell us, how is your Lord? What is He made of?" He replied: "He is not made of anything. He transcends all things." Thereupon this *Sūrah* was sent down.

It emerges from these reports that on different occasions several people had enquired of the Prophet (peace be upon him) about the nature and kind of the Lord, whose worship he asked people to do. On each occasion, in reply to their questions, he recited this *Sūrah* by Allah's command. This type of question was first posited by the Quraysh polytheists of Makkah, and in response to this, *Sūrah al-Ikhlāṣ* was sent down. Later, in Madīnah, Jews, Christians and some other Arabs put forward similar questions to him. In each instance, Allah directed him to recite this *Sūrah* as his reply. The above reports indicate that this *Sūrah* was revealed on each of these occasions. However, it does not amount to any contradiction. Whenever an issue was presented before the Prophet (peace be upon him) for clarification or comment, and the same was covered by an already revealed verse or *Sūrah*, Allah directed him to recite the same as his response. *Ḥadīth* narrators report this in such a way that it appears as if that verse or *Sūrah* was sent down at that particular point, whereas it had already been revealed. This may be termed as the repetition of revelation, for it is as if a verse or *Sūrah* was sent down several times.

So, the correct position is that it is a Makkan *Sūrah*. While studying its contents one recognizes that it must have been revealed during the early Makkan period. By then, Qur'ānic verses containing a detailed account of Allah's being and attributes had not been sent down. On hearing the Prophet's message, people had developed curiosity to find out more about his Lord, the object of all worship in Islam. That it is an early Makkan *Sūrah* is also proved by the following incident: When Umayyah ibn Khalaf, the

master of Bilāl, used to drag the latter in hot sand, with a big stone placed on his chest, he kept on uttering *aḥad, aḥad* (the One). The word *aḥad* as used of Allah occurs in this *Sūrah*.

Subject Matter and Themes

While going through these reports about the occasion of its revelation, one gets an idea of the religious beliefs prevalent in the early days of the Prophet's mission. The idolatrous polytheists used to worship deities made of wood, stone, gold, silver and other materials. Their gods had physical dimensions, forms, figures and bodies. Their gods and goddesses had their progeny. Each god had a spouse. They ate and drank and these provisions were arranged for by their devotees. Many polytheists believed in the human incarnation of God. Although Christians claimed to be monotheists, their God too, had, at least, a Son and the Holy Ghost was part of the Trinity. These gods had mothers and mothers-in-law as well. Jews too, laid their claim to be monotheists, yet their God too, had material and physical aspects, and even some human traits. For example, He walked, assumed human form, wrestled with one of His servants and had a son, 'Uzayr. Then there were Magians, the fire worshippers and Sabians who worshipped stars. Against this backdrop, when people were asked to disregard this pantheon of gods and to believe only in the One True God, their curiosity was natural. In its own miraculously pithy style the Qur'ān answers all these questions in a few, short verses. It presents a comprehensive concept of Allah which strikes a fatal blow to all polytheistic notions about Allah. It leaves no room for mixing up human and divine attributes.

Excellence and importance of this Sūrah: The Prophet (peace be upon him) held this *Sūrah* in great esteem in view of all these considerations. He urged Muslims to recognize its excellence, to recite it profusely and to preach its message. For it introduces the fundamental Islamic doctrine of monotheism in four succinct statements, which leave an imprint on the mind and the heart. Many reports state that on several occasions the Prophet (peace be upon him) underscored that this *Sūrah* is equal to one-third

of the Qur'ān. Bukhārī, Muslim, Abū Dāwūd, Nasā'ī, Tirmidhī, Ibn Mājah, Aḥmad and Ṭabarānī have cited such reports on the authority of these Companions – Abū Sa'īd Khudrī, Abū Hurayrah, Abū Ayyūb Anṣārī, Abū al-Dardā', Mu'ādh ibn Jabal, Jābir ibn 'Abd Allāh, Ubbay ibn Ka'b, Umm Kulthūm bint 'Uqbah ibn Abī Mu'ayt, Ibn 'Umar, Ibn Mas'ūd, Qatādah ibn al-Nu'mān, Anas ibn Mālik and Abū Mas'ūd. (Bukhārī, *Bāb al-Tafsīr*). The Qur'ānic scholars have also elucidated extensively on the Prophet's observation. Of these, the self-evident truth is that the faith propounded by the Qur'ān rests on three planks: (1) Monotheism, (2) Messengership and (3) the Hereafter. Since this *Sūrah* describes pure monotheism, the Prophet (peace be upon him) declared it as equal to one-third of the Qur'ān, (Bukhārī, *Bāb al-Adhān*).

The following report by 'Ā'ishah features in Bukhārī's and other *Ḥadīth* collections: "The Prophet (peace be upon him) had appointed someone as the leader of an expedition. During that journey, it was his practice to conclude his Qur'ān recitation with *Sūrah al-Ikhlāṣ* in every Prayer. On his return, this was brought to the Prophet's attention. He was then asked as to why he recited only this *Sūrah*. In reply, he said that since this *Sūrah* spells out the attributes of the Most Compassionate One, he loved to recite it. Upon hearing this the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "Tell him that Allah loves him."

Another similar incident is narrated by Anas, which is included in Bukhārī's collection: "An Anṣār used to lead Prayers in Quba Mosque. It was his practice to recite first *Sūrah al-Ikhlāṣ*, followed by another *Sūrah*. Some people objected, pointing out that it was not proper to recite another *Sūrah* besides *Sūrah al-Ikhlāṣ* and that he should recite only one *Sūrah*. That Anṣār refused to budge, saying that he would prefer to leave the job. People were not willing for this either. When this was reported to the Prophet (peace be upon him), he asked him as to why he did not listen to them others. "What prompts you to recite this *Sūrah* in every *rak'ah*?" He submitted: "I love this." Then the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "Your love of this *Sūrah* has ensured your entry into Paradise," (Bukhārī, *Bāb al-Jam' bayn al-Sūratayn*).